

MIRACLES

BY GOUVERNEUR MORRIS.

A Story of the Hills Which Has An Unusually Striking Climax

THE first thing that happened wasn't exactly a miracle. Just the same, it was a wonderful happening.

Suppose that you were 21 years old and that all your life long you had desired an automobile (any kind that would go and run) and that, upon the morning of your 21st birthday a man of law came to the house in which you resided with your parents and informed you that your mother's brother, a crochety old fellow whom nobody had seen or heard of for years, had died and made you his heir and left you nearly a thousand dollars in lawful currency and a little fruit ranch in that loveliest of valleys, which runs itself the year round between the City of Salinas and the City of Monterey.

It was to Ruddy Copeland that the amazing thing happened, and his twenty-second year was no more than five days old before he had bought a very second-hand special roadster painted a delicate baby blue—and set forth to view the more productive part of his inheritance.

The way led through the old mission city of San Juan. And here he ran plump into his first miracle. But I am afraid he scoffed at them at that time and was very skeptical as to the true miraculousness of them.

Upon the top of a hill just outside the city a man and his disciples had pitched a tent. The miracle man was a long white robe and a long white beard and from morning till late at night he talked in a sing-song voice about his ability to cure sick people by the simple act of laying his hands upon them and wishing them well. His disciples, a stout man and stout women with gold-rimmed spectacles, went about saying that everything the miracle man said was true, and selling photographs at 25 cents apiece.

The hill upon which the miracle tent had been pitched was covered with people. They had flocked to see the miracle man from points more than 100 miles distant. Some of them were very sick people who had to be carried by their friends. Every kind of crutch, cripple and ear trumpet was to be seen. There were hunchbacks in the crowd, legs that had shriveled to the size of broomsticks and spines so twisted that they resembled pretzels. But most of the people who had flocked to see the miracle man, or, like Ruddy Copeland, had stopped off on their way to see something else, were only suffering from curiosity.

Once a panic broke out halfway up the hill and several people were knocked down and trampled on. It all came about because of a crowd with a big white scar on its face. The scar gleamed like silver and suddenly, somehow, it talked. Everybody tried to get away from the vicinity of the leper as quickly as possible.

AROUND the miracle tent itself and the space in front of it the crowd was large for 10 days. Ruddy never got near enough to the miracle man to see him, but he did see a crowd of people who were waiting for hours and hours to get a chance at the miracle man would become half frenzied with excitement.

The sick believed that they would be cured. Their friends and relatives hoped against reason and knowledge. But people who were not sick themselves or taken a vital interest in sick people had no faith at all. They thought that the miracle man was a fake.

That was what Ruddy Copeland thought. The show sickened him. He turned away and went home. He tried for a while to find some one or other who had personally been cured by the miracle man or some one or other who had seen only the front rows on the top of the hill saw the cures made, and thereafter the cured persons never seemed to come out of the crowd and circle about persons could get at them and talk with them.

Ruddy Copeland gave up in disgust. He never doubted he had about his heart. He had none about disease. There were Biblical diseases on view, running sores and the things that undoubtedly diseases more serious and less evident that one might breathe in and develop into a consumptive. There were little children, so lame and sick and miserable that they could never possibly grow up. And Ruddy, whose heart was unphosphated and tender, could not bear to look at them.

So he climbed into his baby blue flier and drove away over the mountain pass to Salinas. Here he made inquiries as to the exact location of the little ranch which he had inherited, and how to find it.

NOW the word ranch is an elastic word. It means anything from a half-acre cabbage to a million acres of sage brush. The ranch to which Ruddy's directions led him, and of whose ranch house he had the keys in his pocket, was easily found.

The little white house stood on the top of a very little hill. The hill, perhaps 40 feet high, had been flatly terraced for the accommodation of blackberry vines and their orderly trellises, and was entirely surrounded by 20 acres of well grown fruit trees. Gentle hills dotted with live oaks in turn surrounded the orchard and a half mile of winding dirt road separated it from the highway over which people travel between Salinas and Monterey.

The dwelling house contained a living room, a dining room, a kitchen and a porch. Outside it looked like an old house, the kind that a child draws on a slate, but inside it looked new.

Ruddy's late uncle had been crochety, but he had loved simplicity and white paint. Ruddy's new home had a beautiful, simple and unpretentious as a monk's cell, but it was as clean and sweet as a rosebud.

At the moment, however, considering the house together with Ruddy's youth and good health, the house had one grave drawback. It contained nothing to eat.

It was Ruddy's intention to eat in Monterey, to buy groceries and return to his ranch. But when he saw the Mission Church perched aloft with the laconic at its feet and the tiled roofs of the little city beyond with pine and oak and the blue sparkling bay, something queer happened to his eyes, and first time in his young life he perceived that the world is only to be considered in terms of utilitarian progress but in terms of beauty as well.

And that was Ruddy's first real miracle.

When he had eaten and bought groceries he did not at once return to his ranch. In the restaurant that he had chosen he saw a certain 17-mile drive of strange trees which grow nowhere else in the world, of an ocean-bound city called Pacific Grove, where artists and authors live in amity and speak well of one another, and of the old Carmel Mission and the wonderful highlands beyond.

And he determined to see all these wonders before returning to his ranch and taking up his life's work at the beginning.

A first acquaintance with the Monterey Peninsula has made persons, even less sensitive and accustomed to beauty than Ruddy Copeland, absolutely giddy. Neither the Bay of Naples nor the Riviera nor the Isles of Greece where Sappho sang—and ought to have been arrested—can hold a candle to it.

AFTER a day and a half of sight-seeing Ruddy drove slowly down the long hill which is the approach to Monterey from Carmel, a very different person from the 21-year-old boy who so recently had inherited a fruit ranch and nearly \$1,000 in cash.

His heroes had always been those persons who appear to make the world go round, and who, through personal initiative, energy and inventiveness, have acquired large fortunes. And now he felt that a false rating of those persons had hurt his life instead of helping it. He wished that at the university, instead of studying business and mechanics, he had studied the courses in art and literature. He felt very tender hearted and a little sad.

A girl sat at the open window of a house which had only two windows and a door between them. There was a faint railing of the house and a dilapidated touring car.

Some men were carrying a coffin through the gate in the house fence—a heavy one, and the men were bent over and presently they heaved upon one end of it and slid it into the house. Two of them climbed into the coffin and the other two sat on the others, with two fat women with black veils, who had been looking on, piled into the touring car.

Then one of the men jumped out of the touring car and ran back to the girl at the window, took her hand and paid it and said something or other to her. She gave two or three quick little nods and compressed her lips.

Ruddy just managed to avoid running into a car that was on its way up the hill. The tragic beauty of that sweet, grave face at the window had been so much on his mind.

After a while he turned about and drove back up the hill. The house and the touring car were still there, but the girl was still sitting at the window, looking out, and as it seemed to Ruddy, something terrible had happened to her.

He drove clear to the top of the hill, a mile and a half away, turned and drove slowly down. A few blocks above the house of mourning he parked his car and continued the descent on foot. He did not know what he was going to do. He had no plan. And he could not help feeling that he was going to do it.

He passed under the whole and went straight to the window at which the girl sat. He asked for a drink of water. And that made her shush. She had to confess that she couldn't get it for him.

"I'm very lame," she said. "I've nearly always been lame. It's really worse than that. I can't walk at all. This statement affected Ruddy just as a piece of bad news about somebody he had always known and liked would have done.

"But," he said, "suppose you wanted a drink of water or something for yourself? Are you all alone in the house?"

"I would have to wait," she said, "until somebody I knew came by. But you can come in and get yourself a drink of water."

The house seemed to be divided into two halves. In one half the girl sat with a blanket around her knees. The other was probably a bedroom. A ladder led to a loft. At the back was a lean-to kitchen.

Ruddy found a tumbler and a faucet. And though he was not thirsty he drank.

THE house was very bare and unlovely. They must be very poor people," he thought. He wanted to stay and talk with the girl. Her beauty and her helplessness had touched his heart.

He had always heard that there was much good Castilian blood in Monterey, and that some of the girls were beautiful. This girl had a Spanish look, and her beauty could not have been denied.

He paused with his hand on the door latch.

Her eyes were lifted squarely to his.

"Could you tell me the time?" she asked.

He looked at his watch and told her.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "Is that all?"

"Every minute of it," said Ruddy.

"My watch keeps splendid time. But why? Is there anything I can do? Please ask me. I haven't a thing to do. I'm a stranger in Monterey. And I've just been seeing the sights. It's so beautiful here. I'd no idea. I wish you'd tell me if there's anything I can do."

"My uncle," said the girl, "who took care of me, died day before yesterday. They've taken him to Carmel to bury him. When they come back we will decide what is to be done of me. I can't work, and there isn't any money. I don't even own this house."

Ruddy pulled a chair close to hers and sat down.

"Are they—the people I saw here awhile ago—relatives?"

She shook her head.

"Just neighbors. We didn't even know them well. They are kind-hearted people, but they are poor people and they don't want to be bothered with me."

"Haven't you any idea what you'll do?" Ruddy asked.

"I suppose," she said, and it took a lot of courage to say it, "to come to Monterey. It was the kind of temptation which older and wiser men than Ruddy sometimes yield to. There had been brought to his notice a fellow creature, young, charming, beautiful, helpless and penniless. And the temptation was upon him to play Providence.

"Don't worry," he wanted to say. "Everything will be all right. You shan't go to an institution. I'll take care of you."

If he had felt perfect confidence in his ability to take care of her and to keep her from being sent to an institution he could have made the promise. But he had neither the means nor the experience which Providence would have given him. At the same time he had said something—do something. He couldn't go out of her life with a "Well, it's too bad, but don't worry. I'll take care of you." He felt that he had to make her some offer of personal service and sacrifice—even if it wasn't very much.

IT was at this moment that he first began to wonder if the miracle man at San Juan was only a faker or if he really could have made the effect a cure, as all the applause and excitement had indicated. Now the girl believed in the father and mother of belief, and Ruddy began to wish that the girl could see the miracle man and be touched by him and that he could see the miracle man.

"I couldn't get very close," he said, "but the people in the front row who actually saw the cures—they believed. And all the sick people who were trying to get to the miracle man believed. I don't know what you think about such things, but they sure did happen in Bible times. And I suppose there's no reason why they shouldn't happen now."

"In one place there was a big pile of crutches—people who'd been lame all their lives had thrown them away—no more use for them."

He did not wish to arouse false hopes in her breast. He gave a sincere and honest account of his own impressions and his own skepticism. But the girl's eyes began to gleam with excitement. In the telling of the miracle man, Ruddy had "sold" her the miracle man.

He perceived this and said: "Don't count too much on him. Maybe he can't cure everybody. But— it's only an hour and a half run in my car. There's no harm in trying."

It's too late today—but if you say I'll come around first thing tomorrow morning and I bet I'll get you to him no matter how thick the crowd is. I played back on my college team and somehow or other we'll get through."

Will you go?"

She did not say "Yes. I will go." She looked at him in an adoring, worshipful kind of way and said: "Oh, please take me—please—please take me."

If the young people had taken the trouble to read a copy of the Monterey Herald or the Cypress they would have saved themselves the long run to San Juan and return. They would have learned that the miracle man and the apostles with the gold-rimmed spectacles had been arrested and locked up on a number of charges such as vagrancy and conspiracy to defraud. They would have learned that the miracle man himself was suffering from a frightful cold in the head and a loosening of the vocal cords, accompanied by an almost total loss of his singing voice, and that of this condition he found it quite impossible to cure himself.

But the young people would not be so easily deterred. They had long run in the bright fresh weather.

Ruddy had lifted the girl bodily out of her chair and carried her out to the car. If the way to San Juan and return he looked forward to lifting her once more, and have her there for a little while in his arms.

All night she had been either in his conscious or in his subconscious mind. The feeling grew and grew in him that he had discovered quite an exquisite jewel, which because nobody claimed it belonged to him and was his to cherish and take care of.

When they reached San Juan and learned about the miracle man the girl was bitterly disappointed. Two very big tears came slowly out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. But Ruddy bought sandwiches and hot coffee and brought them to her in the car, and comforted her.

"Suppose," he said, "that there was always going to be a car to ride in and somebody to let you in and out of it? You should worry!"

THE temptation to play Providence overcame him. Caution and common sense fled. He wiped away her tears with his own handkerchief and he had finished his hand was trembling.

"I'm going to take care of you," he said, "always. And he went on: 'I almost frightened him into behaving saw you and learned you had nobody. But I was scared to say so. I was scared that you'd never get to like me enough and that you'd rather have given him a happy thought. You wouldn't—would you? I've got a little ranch, lots of tiptop pear trees, and the cutest little goat. But that's not enough for one man to take care of.'"

"You're just sorry for me," he said, "and—"

He broke in, "and—your stuck with me and then I couldn't walk. I've given him a happy thought. You wouldn't—would you? I've got a little ranch, lots of tiptop pear trees, and the cutest little goat. But that's not enough for one man to take care of.'"

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